

Alton Frye

The JFK Assassination: Curiosity

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An inquisitive American learns many things on a visit to Cuba. One of the most surprising is that high officials in Havana seem genuinely hopeful that the investigation of the Kennedy assassination will be reopened. They are convinced that there was a Cuban factor in the murder.

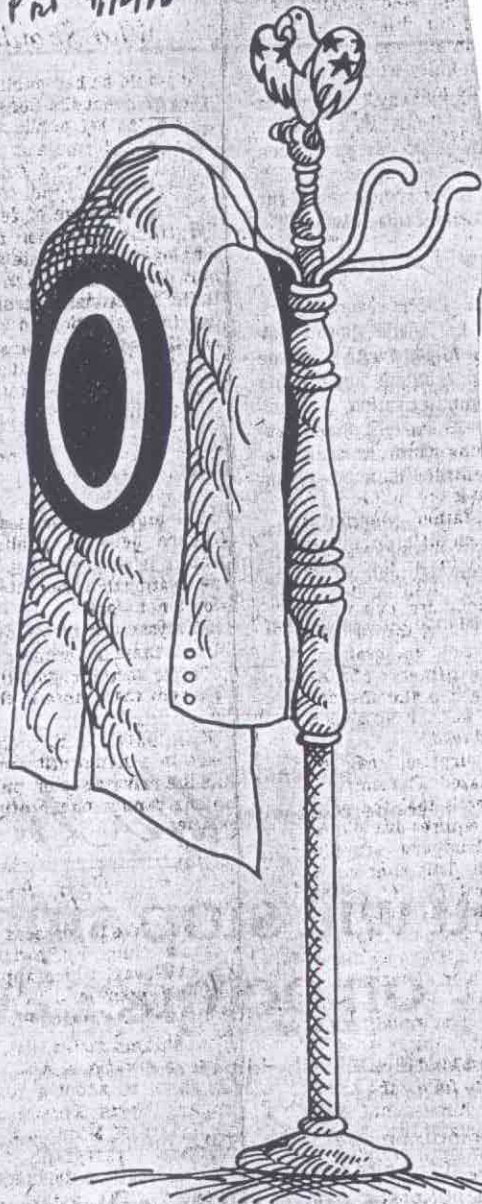
Conversations with senior officials of the Cuban government, including Deputy Prime Minister Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, make clear that they have followed closely the disclosures by the Senate Intelligence Committee casting doubt upon the Warren Commission investigation. The Cubans are well aware that the doubts center on the failure of the CIA and the FBI to inform the Warren Commission of the several plots mounted by the CIA to kill Fidel Castro. Knowledge of these plots appears to have been withheld even from the FBI and CIA officials who were responsible for investigating the President's murder and for supporting the work of the Warren Commission. As a result, there was no special effort to explore the possible involvement of either the Cuban government or Cuban exiles in the assassination. Evidence developed by the Senate committee makes both hypotheses plausible—and a new inquiry imperative.

The situation is murkier and more perplexing than ever. Those who are resistant to conspiracy theories and who have been prepared—even eager—to believe that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone can no longer rely on the Warren Commission report as an

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adequate prop for their predilections. The commission did not know that on Nov. 22, 1963, at about the very hour Oswald struck in Dallas, an agent of the Central Intelligence Agency was meeting with a ranking Cuban official (code-named AMLASH and recently identified as Rolando Cubela) to plan the murder of Castro. Simultaneously, in Cuba, a French reporter, Jean Daniel, was spending the day with Castro, conveying to the Cuban leader views expressed by President Kennedy in a brief interview at the White House on Oct. 24, persuading Castro that Kennedy wanted to explore ways to normalize relations. Thus, at the moment the President was killed, U.S. policy toward Cuba appeared to be moving not only on two tracks but in opposite directions, and movement on either track could have provoked violent response by one or another Cuban faction.

Perceptions inside the Cuban government responded to both tendencies in U.S. policy. There is good reason to suspect that the AMLASH operation involved a double agent, or at least a singularly inept one. Castro almost certainly knew of it. The CIA eventually concluded that the AMLASH activity was "insecure" and terminated it. Among other discoveries, within two days of the assassination it was known (but not to the Warren Commission) that AMLASH had been in contact with Soviet personnel in Mexico City, where Oswald had gone in September 1963 to visit both the Cuban and Soviet consulates. Whether these



By Barbara Aliu for The Washington Post

facts are significant or merely coincidental, one cannot tell. In retrospect, Cuban authorities note with some relief that Oswald was denied permission to visit Cuba, implying that, had his request been granted, the finger of suspicion would surely have pointed at Havana.

in Havana

Perhaps more suggestive of a direct leak from AM-LASH to Castro was the sequence of events on Sept. 7, 1963, when the CIA re-established contact with the Cuban conspirator for the first time since the preceding year. Late that evening, Prime Minister Castro called in Associated Press reporter Daniel Harker for an unexpected interview. Only three Western reporters were based in Havana at the time and their contact with Castro was quite limited. Evidently, the Cuban leader had a message he wished to get on the record through Harker. He charged that the United States was aiding terrorist plots in Cuba and warned U.S. leaders that "if they are aiding terrorist plans to eliminate Cuban leaders, they themselves will not be safe."

This threat of reprisals seems less inflammatory and more understandable now that we know what Castro knew at the time, namely, that the United States was in fact stepping up its covert operations against Cuba during the summer and fall of 1963. Yet it seems an exception to the main lines of Cuban policy as it was then evolving.

For months after the missile crisis of 1962, Castro had been displeased with the Soviets, and there are signs that he was interested in an opening to Washington. On Sept. 5, the Cubans quietly proposed talks with the Americans at the United Nations, and Kennedy soon responded with interest. Also, in early September the Time magazine bureau chief in Buenos Aires, Gavin Scott, travelling on a Canadian passport, spent two weeks in Cuba. Although key U.S. officials have no recollection of consulting with Scott on that occasion, the Cubans recall his questions and comments as hinting of American interest in a possible accommodation, much as they were later to interpret the discussions between Jean Daniel and Castro.

Then and now the Cubans' attitude toward Kennedy has been a compound of political antipathy and personal admiration. While critical of Kennedy's role in various counter-revolutionary efforts, Castro and his associates voice a warm, almost affectionate regard for the President's courage and realism. They profess to have seen his death as a grave setback to more hopeful relations between the two countries. The John Kennedy of 1963 was not, in their judgment, the same man who was inaugurated in 1961, but a more mature, poised and forward-looking leader with whom they could have done business.

With this frame of reference, Cuban officials speculate that the real origin of the assassination lies in anti-Castro circles, with which Oswald also was in touch. They emphasize that assassination is incompatible with their own revolutionary doctrine and that they never contemplated it even against Batista, the previous Cuban ruler. And they volunteer the suspicion that the recent murders of Sam Giancana and Johnny Rosselli, the Mafia figures who consorted with the CIA to kill Castro, surely have some connection with Cuban exile politics and the Kennedy murder.

Castro has said publicly that he has no proof "counter-revolutionary elements" planned the assassination, but that is clearly the consensus in Havana. Further investigation may still be inconclusive, but, far from seeing it as an impediment to Cuban-American relations, the Castro regime welcomes such an inquiry. Their curiosity seems greater than their complicity.